

Marketing the Liberal Arts

I do not recall a time when there has been greater skepticism about higher education's value proposition than there is today. It's not going to get better any time soon. This skepticism is particularly acute for the liberal arts, where the path from the degree to a job after graduation is not a direct one. The degree of this skepticism varies from person to person and situation to situation, but in general the higher an institution's price in relation to its measurable outcomes, the more skepticism it will face. For a very few institutions with commanding reputations, the value proposition is self-evident to most consumers. For everybody else, having a compelling account of the value of the experience the institution offers relative to its cost is among the institution's most critical tasks. That means we have to market the value of the liberal arts.

I venture that most of the institutions represented in this room today operate on a tuition-driven financial model. Our college certainly does. For tuition-driven institutions, our ability to deliver on our mission absolutely depends upon our ability to generate sufficient net tuition revenue to fund our operations. Generating that net tuition revenue requires enrolling the right number and the right kind of students, and accomplishing that task requires the compelling value proposition I referred to a moment ago. The value proposition, in other words, is mission-critical, and that makes developing and articulating it one of the President's top responsibilities. It has to be one of the few things we think about every day, thoroughly and completely understand, and own with a passion and zeal that are reflected in the way we communicate it. What follows are some thoughts—recognizing and respecting how different our institutions are--about what the key elements of that value proposition might be.

The most compelling value proposition will argue that a liberal arts education leads to financial independence, professional accomplishment, and personal fulfillment. I begin with financial independence because it is the proverbial bottom line. No parent wants to spend tens, even hundreds, of thousands of dollars on college only to have their student return home and live in the basement. We have to be able to demonstrate that that is not what happens with our students. That means we should be able to say exactly where the students who crossed the stage and shook the President's hand at the last commencement are six months later: what percent have jobs, what percent have gone on to graduate or professional school, what percent are doing other things and what those things are. This information should be available by major. We should be able to name the top employers of our graduates, have information about their starting salaries, disclose our graduates' acceptance rates into graduate and professional programs, and name the institutions at which they are studying. This information should be available on our websites, clearly displayed in a manner that is easy to understand, and widely shared with prospective students and their families and with all of our other key constituencies. *U.S. News and World Report* will tell prospective students and their families how much you spend per student or your acceptance rate, or your alumni giving rate. None of that information is actually relevant to the key question on their minds: "where will my education take me in life?" The information I'm describing speaks directly to that question.

A compelling value proposition will demonstrate that these outcomes were not the result of serendipity but rather of our intentional institutional efforts to assist students in making the transition from college to the next phase of their lives. We need to be able to

show how we engage students early in their college years in conversation about what they like to do, what they are good at, and how those abilities and passions map onto a career direction; how we then help them to explore those career directions through internships, externships, job shadowing, and the like; how we harness the power of our alumni network to assist students in applying for jobs; how we work with employers to bring our students to their attention; how we support students during the job search.

A compelling value proposition not only communicates what happens to our students immediately upon graduation but also reports on the trajectory of their careers. This is the professional accomplishment part. So we need to have and to communicate specific information about how our alumni have progressed in their careers. Twenty years out, where are our alumni? What leadership positions do they hold in their organizations? What professional recognition have they received? What further degrees have they earned? What are their average salaries? And we need to know this across the broad range of our alumni base, rather than relying on anecdotes about the most highly visible graduates that we all have. A truly compelling value proposition will connect the success of our graduates twenty years out to specific aspects of their liberal arts education in ways sufficiently concrete that they make sense to seventeen year-olds and their parents.

Being direct, forthright, transparent and specific about our students' actual outcomes after college is the precondition to extending the conversation to the outcomes of a liberal arts education that are less tangible, though not less important. I call it the "precondition" because it takes off the table—assuming we have good outcomes to report—the greatest challenge to marketing the liberal arts, which is to convince prospective

students and their families that a degree in English—I pick on my own discipline—however fulfilling and gratifying it might be during the college years, is not going to be a liability in the competition for jobs with students who majored in a subject with a much more direct path to employment. By leading with this information we establish our *bona fides* as institutions committed to the long-term happiness and prosperity and success of our students, not just to the tuition revenue they bring us while on campus.

Having earned the right to speak more expansively about a liberal arts education, we are now free to explain to students and their families how that education prepares them for the success we have just demonstrated. How, for example, the defining characteristic of the world our students will inhabit is change and how a liberal arts education best prepares you to flourish in an unknown future because it is not tied to a specific version of the present. How it equips you with a toolkit—the ability to write clear, correct prose; to reason quantitatively; to understand the geography of human knowledge so that you are able to recognize a problem and to know what kinds of questions you can ask to best yield insights into that type of problem; to work productively in groups; to learn in community with others; to function in a multiculturally-enriched environment; to appreciate the arts, and so on.

We shouldn't be afraid to make this case, especially when it rests on the kind of solid data I have just been describing. The proposition that when today's high school seniors are my age they will face a very different world than the one they inhabit today is self-evident. I went to college before the personal computer, before the fall of the Iron Curtain, before the Eurozone, before cell phones, Facebook, and Twitter. Most parents of prospective college students could easily come up with a similar version of then and now,

and they can easily extrapolate from their own experience to what their children can expect. An education that equips their students to flourish in an uncertain future by giving them transferable knowledge and skills and teaching them how to learn on their own is very attractive.

I said at the beginning of these remarks that a compelling value proposition presents the outcomes of a liberal arts education as financial independence, professional success, and personal happiness. Personal happiness is the hardest to quantify, obviously, but there are behaviors we can measure that are characteristic of active, engaged, citizens, such as civic engagement, volunteerism, memberships in interest groups from Amnesty International to Friends of the Symphony to Pheasants Forever, and alumni surveys can yield that information. Compelling personal testimony by our graduates is another important source of information. Because it is the least immediate, least measurable, and least directly correlated to what happens in college, I frankly think this element of the value proposition only works when it complements the other elements I have focused on in these remarks. It doesn't stand alone.

I'll stop now to leave time for the other speakers and for your thoughts and comments. The days are over when we can simply assert the value of the liberal arts and expect people to accept that. Most of our institutions are not the least expensive option that our prospective students and their families are considering, and therefore we need to make the case that the extra investment we are asking them to make up front has concrete results in the short term and in the long term, and we have to make that case with appropriate modesty and humility, letting the facts speak for themselves. If we do that, we can be very successful at marketing the liberal arts.

Thanks for your kind attention.